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CITY Washington, D.C.

THE POST OFFICE AND CIA

JOHN CHANCELLOR: A former CIA official said today that the agency, with help from the Post Office and the FBI, intercepted, opened and copied mail being sent by American citizens to the Soviet Union and to countries in the Soviet Bloc.

The former CIA man is Dr. Melvin Crain, who quit the agency 15 years ago and now is a professor of political science at San Diego State University.

Bill Windsor interviewed Crain.

DR. MELVIN CRAIN: This was a result of very sophisticated interception of the mail by Post Office Department with special technology located in two main Post Offices of the country; New Orleans and New York. They could, they claimed, intercept the mail, reproduce it, reseal it and send it on its way without any interruption of flow or without it -- it at all being detectable by anybody.

I have -- have one of the letters which I kept. It was written by, presumably a student from Amherst to, presumably another student at the University of Moscow. And it concerns the transmission of some copies of the Amherst student newspaper.

BILL WINDSOR: Isn't this against the law?

DR. CRAIN: They said that this activity -- this surreptitious opening of first class mail by U.S. citizens -- that is mail of U.S. citizens -- was a violation of the Constitution, a violation of the agency charter, illegal no matter how you look at it.